



## Ethiopia

### International Religious Freedom Report 2008

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, on occasion local authorities infringed on this right. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. Some Protestant and Muslim groups continued to complain that local officials discriminated against them when they sought land for churches, mosques, and cemeteries, but there was no infringement on religious practice.

Tensions between Muslim and Christian communities resulted in localized violent episodes. Additionally, there was reported tension between the traditional Sufi Muslim majority and Salafi/Wahhabi Muslims who derived support in part from foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 472,000 square miles, and a population of 77 million. An estimated 40 to 45 percent of the population belongs to the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC), which is predominant in the northern regions of Tigray and Amhara.

Approximately 45 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim, of which the overwhelming majority is Sufi. Islam is most prevalent in the eastern Somali and Afar regions, as well as in many parts of Oromiya.

Christian evangelical and Pentecostal groups constitute an estimated 10 percent of the population. Established Protestant churches such as Mekane Yesus and the Kale Hiwot are strongest in the Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Regional State (SNNPR); western and central Oromiya; and in urban areas. In Gambella region, Mekane Yesus followers represent 60 percent of the population. The Evangelical Church Fellowship claims 23 denominations under its religious umbrella throughout the country.

There are small numbers of Oriental Rite and Latin Rite Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Jews, animists, and practitioners of traditional indigenous religions.

The country has a small Falash Mura community. Falash Mura are being processed for immigration to Israel, and the number remaining is dwindling rapidly. The Israeli Government is expected to finalize immigration of the remaining Falash Mura in 2008. Many additional individuals claiming to be Falash Mura are also seeking immigration to Israel, but many appear to be economic immigrants rather than genuine Falash Mura. The Government is cooperating with the Government of Israel to facilitate emigration of the remaining Falash Mura community.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and other laws and policies contributed to the generally free practice of religion. The law at all levels protects this right in full against abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

The Constitution requires the separation of state and religion; the Government generally respected this provision in practice.

The Government requires registration of religious groups. Religious institutions and churches, like NGOs, must renew their registration with the Ministry of Justice every three years. The Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) stated that this registration requirement reflects a lack of progress or improvement in the Government's treatment of "newer religions," specifically Protestant churches. Mekane Yesus, the Evangelical Fellowship, and the Catholic Church asserted that churches should be placed in a different status than NGOs. A different status would spare religious groups the rigorous scrutiny that the Government places on NGOs, and facilitate registration, importation of religious materials tax-free, ease in obtaining visas for religious workers, etc.

Under the law, any religious organization that undertakes development activities must register its development wing separately as an NGO with the Ministry of Justice. To register, each religious organization must complete an application form and submit a copy of its bylaws, curriculum vitae of the organization's leader, and a copy of the leader's identity card. A group's failure to register results in denial of legal standing, which prevents it from opening a bank account or fully participating in any court proceeding.

The Government officially recognizes both Christian and Muslim holidays and continues to mandate a 2-hour lunch break on Fridays to allow Muslims to go to a mosque for prayers. Official holidays include Christmas, Epiphany, Good Friday, Easter, Meskel, Eid al-Adha, the Birth of the Prophet Muhammad, and Eid al-Fitr. The Government also agreed to a request by Muslim students at Addis Ababa Commercial College to delay the start of afternoon classes until 1:30 p.m., to permit them to perform afternoon prayers.

Under the press law, it is a crime to incite one religion against another. The press law also allows defamation claims involving religious leaders to be prosecuted as criminal cases. The EHRCO reported that no journalists were detained or charged during the reporting period with inciting religious groups or with defamation of religious leaders.

Religious groups, like private individuals or businesses, must apply to regional and local governments for land allocation. Religious groups are given use of government land for churches, schools, hospitals, and cemeteries free of charge; however, religious schools and hospitals, regardless of length of operation, are subject to government closure and land forfeiture at any time. An interfaith effort to promote revision of the law for religious organizations to obtain duty-free status continued.

The Government interprets the constitutional provision for separation of religion and state to mean that religious instruction is not permitted in schools, whether public or private. Schools owned and operated by Catholic, Orthodox, evangelical, and Muslim groups were not allowed to teach religion as a course of study. The Government Education Bureau complained that the morals courses most private schools teach as part of their curriculum are not free of religious influence. Churches are permitted to have Sunday schools, the Qur'an is taught at mosques, and public schools permit the formation of clubs, including those of a religious nature.

#### Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government generally respected religious freedom in practice; however, on occasion local authorities infringed on this right. There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom by the Government during the period covered by this report. However, two local administrators were implicated for incitement in a religious clash between Christians and Muslims in the county.

The Government banned the formation of political parties based on religion. There were no religious political parties in the country.

The EOC never registered with the Government and has never faced repercussions. The Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC), after registering 10 years ago, never re-registered. All other indigenous groups must re-register every 3 years. Protests from these groups over the exceptions did not result in equal treatment from the Government, nor did the groups attempt to forego registering, fearing negative consequences.

Unlike indigenous groups, the Apostolic Nuncio must re-register annually because his organization is foreign-based. The Nuncio wrote repeatedly to the Prime Minister's Office seeking equal treatment before the law. However, there was no change in government policy during the period covered by this report.

The Government did not issue work visas to foreign religious workers unless they were associated with the development wing of a religious organization licensed by the Government. However, this policy was not consistently enforced for Muslims or Orthodox Christians.

Minority religious groups complained of discrimination in the allocation of government land for religious sites. Protestants reported inequities in treatment and access by local officials when seeking land for churches and cemeteries. Evangelical leaders felt that as perceived newcomers, they remained disadvantaged in the allocation of land compared with the EOC and the EIASC. The EIASC complained that it had more difficulty than the EOC obtaining land from the Government, while others believed that the EIASC was favored for mosque locations.

Local authorities in the northern town of Axum, a holy city for the EOC, continued to deny Muslim leaders' repeated requests to allocate land for the construction of a mosque. Muslims have had access to land to build homes and nonreligious buildings in Axum since 1995. Tigray and Amhara regional government officials also refused to grant land to Muslims to build, and the Federal Government did not overrule them.

Following the numerous religious conflicts in late 2006 in the western part of the country, the federal and regional governments significantly increased the presence of government security forces. These forces remained in the area, discouraging further large-scale outbreaks of religious conflict during the reporting period.

The Meserte Kristos/Mennonite Church, Mekane Yesus Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, and the EIASC made no progress in securing the return of property confiscated by the Government under the Derg regime between 1977 and 1991. The Seventh-day Adventists sought the return of two hospitals, among other property. The EIASC continued to try to obtain properties outside the capital that were similarly confiscated. In Addis Ababa and Oromiya, structures have been returned under federal provisions; however, edifices registered under regional statutes have yet to be returned.

#### Abuses of Religious Freedom

On February 16, 2008, Islamic newspapers *Al Kidus* and *Selefia* were closed and the publishers imprisoned. Though released on \$2,100 (20,000 Ethiopian birr) bail after 16 days, they were never formally charged with a crime, nor were they stripped of their publishing licenses; however, their publishing equipment remained impounded, allegedly pending police investigation. While the editors were allegedly arrested for libel of a government leader, the somewhat extreme religious nature of these newspapers cause them to attract extra government scrutiny and suspicion.

#### Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

#### Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

The Government, through the Ministry of Justice and regional state authorities, continued to support the

Interfaith Peace-Building Initiative, an NGO dedicated to promoting interfaith consultation and cooperation and ending religiously motivated violence. The Initiative's members include representatives of the country's major religious institutions: the EOC, EIASC, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church-Mekane Yesus, and the Baha'i Center.

### Section III. Societal Abuses and Discrimination

There were some reports of physical and verbal harassment aimed at religious officials and church members that led victims to seek protection from local authorities. Ethiopian Orthodox leaders reported that Protestants sometimes failed to respect Orthodox holy days and customs. Muslims asserted that some Pentecostal preachers disparaged Islam in their services. Some Muslim and Protestant leaders complained that the EOC's desire to show its dominance caused irritation in the religious community.

The EIASC continued to express concern over increasing external Wahhabi influence within the Muslim community. The EIASC alleged that money flowed into the country through Saudi-funded entities and some NGOs, raising concern over external Islamic influences.

In most regions, Orthodox Christians and Muslims generally respected each other's religious observances, and there was tolerance for intermarriage and conversion in certain areas.

On February 2, 2008, a group of local Muslims armed with machetes attacked churchgoers in two Protestant churches in the West Arsi zone, Oromiya region. The attacks left 1 person dead and 16 others severely wounded. Following the attacks, authorities arrested four perpetrators. On March 26, the West Arsi Zone High Court in Shashamane sentenced three to life in prison and one to four years' imprisonment for their involvement in the crimes.

On June 23, 2008, officials of West Arsi Zone called a meeting of Muslim and Christian religious leaders, elders and residents of Nensebo Wereda at Chebi Kebele, where the incident took place, to send the message to the community of the importance of religious tolerance and advised members of the community to avoid such clashes in the future.

On October 16, 2007, Muslims attacked 25 Christian families in Seka Yoyo, destroying 12 houses. Authorities arrested the attackers and the trial remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Released on September 19, 2008

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